

CONTOURS OF LINGUISTIC FEDERALISM: THE PUNJABI SUBA MOVEMENT AND THE REORGANISATION OF PUNJAB, 1947–1966

Narpinder Singh Nagra

Assistant Professor, Department of History, SCD Government College, Ludhiana

ABSTRACT

The reorganisation of Punjab in 1966 represents one of the most revealing moments in the making of India's federal structure, shaped by the long and often turbulent history of the Punjabi Suba movement. Rather than viewing this movement through narrow binaries either as a linguistic claim or a communal project this article approaches it as a layered historical process in which language, religion and political uncertainty after Partition became deeply entangled. In Punjab, language was never merely a tool of communication; it was inseparable from script, memory and identity and therefore carried profound political meaning. By situating the Punjabi Suba demand within the broader trajectory of linguistic reorganisation in India, this study highlights what made Punjab distinctive. The movement unfolded in a region still marked by the violence and dislocation of Partition, where demographic shifts and competing affiliations shaped how communities defined their linguistic loyalties. Drawing on legislative debates, Akali Dal documents and contemporary public discourse, the article argues that the demand for Punjabi Suba was driven as much by historical experience and insecurity as by constitutional ideals of linguistic equality. The eventual creation of Punjab in 1966 resolved the immediate demand, yet it did not bring closure. Instead, it generated new tensions over territory, resources and identity. The Punjabi Suba movement thus offers a critical lens through which to understand both the possibilities and the inherent limits of accommodating diversity within India's federal framework.

INTRODUCTION

The formation of a Punjabi-speaking state in 1966 was far from a routine administrative decision; it was the outcome of a prolonged and often contentious political process shaped by competing understandings of Identity, Language and Governance. The Punjabi Suba movement, led largely by the Shiromani Akali Dal, presented its demand in the language of linguistic rights, invoking principles that had already guided state reorganisation elsewhere in India. Yet, in Punjab, this demand was never received in purely linguistic terms. Instead, it was filtered through the lived experience of Partition, where memories of displacement, violence and demographic upheaval continued to shape political perceptions. As a result, language became entangled with deeper concerns about religious identity and the distribution of political power between Sikh and Hindu communities. This study situates the Punjabi Suba movement within India's wider experiment with linguistic federalism, but it also underscores Punjab's distinctiveness. Unlike Andhra or Kerala, where linguistic identity translated more readily into statehood, Punjab presented a far more complicated terrain. Here, language was inseparable from script and community affiliation: Punjabi in Gurmukhi was closely tied to Sikh identity, while many Punjabi Hindus increasingly identified with Hindi in the Devanagari script. This divergence did not simply reflect linguistic preference—it revealed competing visions of belonging and political future, turning a constitutional claim into a site of intense contestation. Against this backdrop, the article explores three central questions: how did a demand framed around language evolve into a mass political movement with broader social implications? Why did the central government approach Punjab with greater

hesitation than other regions? And what were the long-term consequences of the 1966 reorganisation for regional politics and federal relations in India?

COLONIAL LEGACIES AND LINGUISTIC CONSCIOUSNESS

The origins of the Punjabi Suba movement can be traced back to the transformations introduced during colonial rule, when language became an instrument of governance as well as a marker of identity. Under the British administration, Urdu was institutionalised as the official language of courts and bureaucracy, even though Punjabi remained the everyday language of the vast majority of the population. This disjuncture between lived linguistic practice and administrative policy gradually pushed Punjabi to the margins of formal recognition. Census operations further complicated matters by classifying Punjabi speakers under broader linguistic labels such as “Hindustani,” thereby obscuring the distinctiveness of the language and limiting its visibility within official frameworks. At the same time, language was being reshaped from below through religious and social reform movements. The Singh Sabha movement, emerging in the late nineteenth century, actively promoted Punjabi written in the Gurmukhi script as a vital component of Sikh identity and cultural continuity. In contrast, organisations such as the Arya Samaj advocated for Hindi in the Devanagari script, linking it to a broader vision of Hindu reform and revival. What might have remained a question of linguistic preference thus acquired sharper boundaries, as script and language began to align with religious affiliation. By the early twentieth century, these developments had begun to crystallise into political consciousness. The Shiromani Akali Dal, drawing upon both religious reform traditions and emerging democratic politics, incorporated the defence of Punjabi language into its broader agenda. Language was no longer simply a medium of communication; it had become a symbol of community, dignity and representation. As independence approached, these layered histories ensured that linguistic claims in Punjab would carry meanings far beyond culture, shaping the contours of political mobilisation in the decades to follow.

PARTITION AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF PUNJAB

The Partition of 1947 transformed Punjab in ways that were both immediate and deeply enduring, reshaping not only its political structures but also the everyday fabric of social life. The division of the province severed its historical centre, Lahore, long regarded as the cultural and administrative heart of Punjab. In its absence, institutional networks were disrupted, and a sense of continuity was profoundly unsettled. At the same time, one of the largest migrations in modern history brought millions across newly drawn borders, carrying with them memories of loss, displacement and uncertainty. These movements did more than alter demographic patterns; they also introduced new layers to linguistic identity. Among many Hindu refugees, the adoption of Hindi increasingly became a way of locating themselves within a wider North Indian framework, offering both cultural familiarity and a sense of security in an altered landscape. For Sikh refugees, however, Punjabi—particularly in the Gurmukhi script—took on renewed significance as a marker of continuity and collective identity amid upheaval. Language, in this context, was not simply about communication; it became a way of anchoring belonging in a fractured world. As these differing orientations hardened, the question of “mother tongue” acquired a distinctly political edge. Linguistic choices began to reflect broader anxieties about identity, representation and future power. In the years immediately following Partition, the Akali Dal prioritised the protection of Sikh political interests within the Indian Union. Yet, as debates over language intensified at the national level, it became increasingly evident that cultural recognition alone was insufficient. Territorial reorganisation appeared necessary to secure lasting autonomy.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE PUNJABI SUBA DEMAND

The demand for Punjabi Suba began to take a more defined shape in the early 1950s, most notably with the Shiromani Akali Dal's submission to the States Reorganisation Commission in 1954. In this memorandum, the demand was carefully framed in linguistic terms, presenting Punjabi as the shared language of the region, cutting across religious divisions. The Akali leadership sought to align their claim with the broader principle of linguistic reorganisation already gaining acceptance in other parts of India. Yet, the response was far from supportive. Opposition emerged swiftly and with considerable intensity. Organisations such as the Arya Samaj and the Hindu Mahasabha viewed the demand with suspicion, arguing that it concealed a deeper communal agenda. Leaders within the Punjab Congress reinforced these concerns, cautioning that any such reorganisation could disrupt the fragile balance of the state. The issue became even more complicated in the wake of the 1951 Census. A significant number of Punjabi Hindus reported Hindi as their mother tongue, weakening the statistical case for a Punjabi-speaking state. For the Akalis, this appeared as a strategic denial of linguistic reality; for others, it reflected genuine cultural identification. In this context, language ceased to be a neutral category and instead became a reflection of political loyalties and shifting identities.

MASS MOBILISATION AND POLITICAL AGITATION (1955–1960)

The rejection of Punjabi Suba by the SRC in 1955 transformed the movement into a mass agitation. The Akali Dal launched a series of morchas—disciplined protest campaigns that combined religious symbolism with political mobilisation. Thousands courted arrest, drawing on traditions of sacrifice deeply embedded in Sikh history. The SGPC played a crucial role in sustaining these movements, providing organisational infrastructure, financial support, and moral legitimacy. Gurdwaras became centres of mobilisation, blurring the line between religious and political activity. The state's response—arrests, detentions, and occasional repression—further deepened mistrust. At the same time, media coverage reflected the region's divisions: English-language newspapers often criticised the agitation, while Punjabi papers championed it. By the end of the decade, the Punjabi Suba demand had become deeply embedded in Punjab's political consciousness. It was no longer merely a policy proposal but a symbol of identity and resistance.

LEADERSHIP SHIFTS AND STRATEGIC TRANSFORMATION (1960–1965)

The early 1960s marked a shift in leadership from Master Tara Singh to Sant Fateh Singh. While Tara Singh's approach had been confrontational, Fateh Singh adopted a strategy centred on moral pressure and symbolic protest. His use of the fast unto death was particularly significant. Drawing on Gandhian traditions, the fast transformed the movement's moral narrative, placing the burden of inaction on the government. Although immediate concessions were not forthcoming, the tactic strengthened the movement's legitimacy. Despite renewed negotiations with the central government, progress remained slow. Concerns over communal tensions, territorial disputes, and national security—especially during the Sino-Indian conflict and the 1965 Indo-Pak war—delayed any decisive action.

THE 1966 REORGANISATION: ACHIEVEMENT AND AMBIGUITY

The formation of Punjabi Suba in 1966 was not simply the culmination of prolonged agitation; it was equally shaped by a shifting political climate at the national level. By the mid-1960s, the question of Punjab's reorganisation had lingered unresolved for over a decade, but changing leadership in New Delhi created a new opening. The death of Lal Bahadur Shastri and the subsequent rise of Indira Gandhi altered the political calculus,

allowing the central government to approach the issue with a greater willingness to negotiate and settle what had become a persistent source of regional unrest. The Punjab Reorganisation Act of 1966 formally divided the erstwhile state into three distinct units—Punjab, Haryana, and portions that were integrated into Himachal Pradesh. In doing so, it addressed the central demand for a Punjabi-speaking state, offering a measure of recognition to the linguistic aspirations that had driven the movement. However, the settlement was far from comprehensive. Critical questions were left unresolved, most notably the status of Chandigarh, which was designated as a Union Territory and the contentious issue of river water distribution between the newly formed states.

These unresolved matters ensured that the reorganisation did not mark a definitive closure but rather a transition into a new phase of contestation. While the linguistic demand had been acknowledged, the political and economic implications of division generated fresh tensions. In this sense, the creation of Punjabi Suba was both an achievement and an incomplete settlement—one that resolved a core issue while simultaneously laying the groundwork for future disputes.

POLITICAL AND CULTURAL CONSEQUENCES

The reorganisation of Punjab in 1966 did more than redraw administrative boundaries; it fundamentally reconfigured the state's political and cultural landscape. In the years that followed, the Shiromani Akali Dal consolidated its position as a central political force, drawing strength from its long association with the Punjabi Suba movement and its appeal to regional identity. At the same time, the Indian National Congress remained a formidable competitor, ensuring that politics in Punjab evolved around a sustained and often intense rivalry between the two. This dynamic came to define electoral contests, policy priorities, and the broader direction of governance in the state. On the cultural front, the recognition of Punjabi particularly in the Gurmukhi script marked a significant moment of affirmation. It opened new possibilities for literary expression, theatrical production, and educational development, contributing to what can be seen as a cultural revival. Punjabi increasingly found a secure place in administration, schooling and public discourse, reflecting one of the central aspirations of the movement: the restoration of linguistic dignity and visibility. Yet, the process of consolidation was neither uniform nor complete. Linguistic identity in Punjab remained layered and, at times, contested. In many urban settings, sections of the Hindu population continued to identify with Hindi, not simply as a language of communication but as a marker of broader cultural affiliation. This coexistence of linguistic preferences served as a reminder that the reorganisation, while significant, did not fully resolve the complexities of identity in Punjab, rather it rearticulated them within a new political framework.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

The historiography of the Punjabi Suba movement remains deeply divided. Nationalist scholars have often viewed it as a communal challenge to national unity, while Sikh historians emphasise its legitimacy as a linguistic demand. Marxist interpretations highlight its socio-economic dimensions and foreign scholars situate it within broader patterns of regional politics. These divergent perspectives reflect the movement's inherent ambiguity. It was simultaneously linguistic and communal, cultural and political—a duality that continues to shape its interpretation.

CONCLUSION

The Punjabi Suba movement stands as a critical episode in the history of India's federal experiment. It demonstrates both the possibilities and the limits of accommodating regional

identities within a unified state. On one hand, the creation of Punjabi Suba affirmed the principle that linguistic diversity could be integrated into the constitutional framework. On the other, the persistence of unresolved disputes highlighted the challenges of translating identity into stable governance structures. Ultimately, Punjabi Suba was not merely a state formation—it was a negotiation of memory, identity, and power. Its legacy lies not only in the map of India but in the continuing debate over how a diverse nation can reconcile its many voices within a single democratic framework.

REFERENCES

1. Brass, P. R. (1974). *Language, religion and politics in North India*. Cambridge University Press.
2. Brass, P. R. (1991). *Ethnicity and nationalism: Theory and comparison*. Sage Publications.
3. Gopal, S. (Ed.). (1979). *Selected works of Jawaharlal Nehru* (Vols. 2–4). Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund.
4. Government of India. (1955). *Report of the States Reorganisation Commission*. Government of India Press.
5. Government of India. (1966). *The Punjab Reorganisation Act, 1966*. Ministry of Law and Justice.
6. Gupta, D. (1996). *The context of ethnicity: Sikh identity in a comparative perspective*. Oxford University Press.
7. Nayar, B. R. (1966). *Minority politics in the Punjab*. Princeton University Press.
8. Singh, K. (1999). *A history of the Sikhs: Volume 2, 1839–2004*. Oxford University Press.
9. Singh, G. (1978). *Punjabi Suba: The politics of linguistic reorganisation*. National Book Organisation.
10. Talbot, I. (1991). *Punjab and the Raj, 1849–1947*. Manohar Publications.
11. Talbot, I. (2007). *Divided cities: Partition and its aftermath in Lahore and Amritsar*. Oxford University Press.
12. Tully, M., & Jacob, S. (1985). *Amritsar: Mrs Gandhi's last battle*. Pan Books.
13. Wallace, P. (2011). *The Sikhs in the diaspora*. Cambridge University Press.